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Report of the Secretary-General*

Summary

The overarching goal of the United Nations University (UNU) is the advancement of knowledge in areas relevant to addressing global issues of human security and development. As an international community of scholars, UNU strives to be a think tank for the United Nations system, a bridge between the United Nations and the international scientific community, a builder of capacities (particularly in developing countries) and a platform for dialogue and new and creative ideas. The special nature of UNU is that it not only combines research, policy studies and teaching, but also brings to this work a global perspective that incorporates both theoretical and practical approaches.

Rather than attempting to provide an exhaustive account of the University's work, the present report focuses on selected key topics, activities and programmes achieved by UNU in 2003 and 2004. These include UNU participation in key conferences and international events, its various research programmes, and its interaction with the United Nations system.

* The present document was submitted late owing to the need to collect updated information.

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I. Introduction

1. The present report should be read in conjunction with the report of the Council of the United Nations University (UNU) on the work of the University in 2003[1] — which contains a comprehensive section on the interaction between the University and the United Nations system — as well as with General Assembly resolution 57/267 of 20 December 2002, in which the Assembly requests the Secretary-General to encourage other bodies of the United Nations system to utilize more fully the capacity of the University for mobilizing a worldwide network of applied policy researchers to assist the Organization, through research and capacity development, in resolving the pressing global problems of the day.

2. The mission of the University, as set forth in its Charter, is to contribute, through research and capacity-building, to the resolution of pressing problems that are of concern to the United Nations. It thus plays five basic roles: as an international community of scholars; as a bridge between the United Nations and the international academic and research community; as a think tank for the United Nations; as an instrument for capacity development; and as a platform for dialogue. These are highlighted in a UNU document on strategic directions which articulates the vision to make UNU a more effective research and capacity development organization that makes relevant, timely and beneficial contributions to the achievement of the goals and objectives of the United Nations. Within this overall framework, enhanced relations with the United Nations, while preserving the autonomy of the University, is a key policy objective of UNU.

II. Contribution to United Nations conferences and other international events

3. The University has been closely involved in substantive work in support of major United Nations conferences. UNU has undertaken special policy studies that were made available to the preparatory bodies of United Nations conferences and/or to the conferences themselves. The University has also organized special events related to themes raised in United Nations conferences or has initiated work related to their follow-up.

4. In addition to undertaking its ongoing agenda of research, capacity development and dissemination activities, UNU actively contributed in 2003 to several major international events held in Japan. These included the Third World Water Forum (March), a Wilton Park Conference (September), the Third Tokyo International Conference on African Development (September/October) and the Asia Regional Conference on the World Summit on the Information Society at Tokyo (December).

5. During the International Year of Freshwater, 2003, UNU played an important role in organizing a number of sessions at the Third World Water Forum; experts from the environment and sustainable development programme and the UNU International Network on Water, Environment and Health (UNU-INWEH) led or participated in discussions at those and other sessions, and UNU Rector Hans J. A. van Ginkel chaired an opening plenary meeting and delivered a keynote address on emerging water issues.

6. UNU also contributed to the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society at Geneva in December 2003. UNU promoted the theme of software for development, focusing on the work of UNU International Institute for Software Technology (UNU-IIST), the UNU-INWEH Water Virtual Learning Centre and other e-learning projects. During 2004, UNU continued to participate in regional and subregional preparatory meetings related to the 2005 World Summit on the Information Society in Tunisia.

7. In February 2004, UNU also participated in the Seventh Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity at Kuala Lumpur and organized a number of academic side events designed to assist developing country delegates to the conference. In late August, UNU, together with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), organized an international conference on globalization and intangible cultural heritage: opportunities, threats and challenges in Tokyo. UNU also organized a number of follow-up workshops related to the Third Tokyo International Conference on African Development in cooperation with the Tokyo African diplomatic corps.

8. The United Nations University Centre in Tokyo and the UNU Institute of Advanced Studies (UNU-IAS) at Yokohama have organized the U Thant Distinguished Lecture Series, a forum that presents eminent thinkers and world leaders speaking on challenges facing the world in the twenty-first century. In 2003-2004, five U Thant Distinguished Lectures were presented in Tokyo to large and broadly representative audiences: three by Nobel laureates (Ahmed H. Zewail, 1999, Chemistry; Peter C. Doherty, 1996, Medicine; Shirin Ebadi, 2003, Peace); and two by serving or former heads of state (Jimmy Carter, United States of America, and Tarja Halonen, Finland).

III. United Nations standing processes and the United Nations University

9. UNU provides continuous support for the efforts of the Second Committee of the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council to enhance their interaction with experts and with knowledge-related institutions in order to enrich and deepen the substance of their policy deliberations. One recent example of the University's involvement was its participation on 20 September 2004 at the Summit of World Leaders for the Action against Hunger and Poverty, which brought together 300 delegates, including 50 heads of state, at which it circulated the UNU World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER) study on *New Sources of Financing Development: Funding the Millennium Development Goals*. Following this, Rector van Ginkel and UNU-WIDER Deputy Director Tony Addison, took part in a discussion on finance for development at the Second Committee meeting, on 13 October 2004.

IV. United Nations University research programmes

10. To ensure that the operational activities of the United Nations wherever possible are guided by in-depth analytical research, UNU mobilizes a global network of researchers for projects that bear directly on some of the core mandates of the United Nations. The research, capacity development and dissemination work

of the University deal with a variety of issues, which as a whole fall under two generic themes, namely, peace and governance and environment and development and their interlinkages. Specific activities and projects are selected on the basis of the relevance of the topics to United Nations objectives, the nature and scale of the human impact and the extent of the problems, the relevance of the issue to developing countries, and the value that UNU can add. The following examples drawn from recent activities represent a selected sample of the UNU démarche.

11. **Post-conflict peace-building and democratization**. Peace agreements by themselves mark only the first stage in bringing back peace and prosperity. War-torn societies are characterized by a traumatic dislocation of economic, political and social relations. Rebuilding civil society is crucial to establishing and consolidating democracy. The long, rich and often troubled experience of the United Nations in fostering the development of democratic habits, practices and institutional arrangements shows persistent challenges that must be confronted.[2] An immediate and urgent challenge is the promotion of democratization in the Middle East. A UNU study[3] concludes that external actors should apply fewer sticks and more carrots — sticks antagonize the population, radicalize some segments and can trigger violence that derails democratization. The timing of elections is also crucial in determining whether they help to consolidate or sabotage efforts at democratization.

12. **Peace and development**. A UNU study[4] draws special attention to the pernicious effects of war and civil conflict in poor countries which cause much more profound and long-lasting damage to taxation, revenue raising and fiscal management than usually recognized. Another study[5] shows that spatial disparities — geographical variations in living standards and human development — have been rising and draws attention to their potential, when aligned with political and ethnic tensions, to undermine social and political stability. Greater efforts will need to be made to ensure more equitable allocation of infrastructure and public services so that the benefits of economic growth permeate to the poor households located far from the main centres of economic activity.

13. **Humanitarian commitments**. A UNU study[6] calls for a reappraisal of the legal, political, normative, institutional and conceptual frameworks through which the international community addresses refugees and displacement. Refugee flows are a source of transnational conflict through causing instability in neighbouring countries, triggering intervention, and sometimes providing a base for the rise of warrior refugee communities within camps that can form the source of insurgency and armed resistance. Dispossessed, aggrieved and rootless populations can also be a breeding ground for radical political movements and terrorist groups. The management of refugee movements and the protection of displaced people should be an integral part of conflict settlement, peacebuilding and regional security.

14. **Natural disaster management**. UNU has embarked on a programme for catastrophic flood risk reduction in Asia-Pacific through a comprehensive approach of hazard and vulnerability reduction.

15. **Achieving the Millennium Development Goals**. UNU studies[7] show that the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals will require greater attention to pro-poor economic growth and to channelling resources to the large number of people on the margins of mainstream economic life. Lack of adequate human, technological and institutional capacity is a major impediment to achieving the safe

drinking water and sanitation goals in developing countries. To help overcome this obstacle within the time frame for the Millennium Development Goals, UNU and the Department of Economic and Social Affairs have developed the Water Virtual Learning Centre, an adult, distance-education programme directed at the current generation of managers, scientists and policy makers. Zinc deficiency is an important cause of the higher morbidity and mortality rates among impoverished children, contributing to impaired growth and development. A collaborative UNU report[8] shows that up to one fifth of the world's people lack sufficient zinc in their diet and that an estimated one third live in countries considered at high risk of zinc deficiency. Interventions to improve zinc status show promise as a relatively low-cost means of improving the health of children, and possibly their chances of survival, in poor countries. A UNU study[9] recommended vital changes to international law to protect the valuable ancient knowledge about medicinal and other uses of plants by indigenous peoples. At present, they are caught in a legal catch-22 requirement that, in order to protect their secrets, they must put them in the public domain for all to see.

16. **Sustainable development**. UNU has been working, both through a number of specific projects and through the work of the UNU Institute for Natural Resources in Africa (UNU-INRA), on promoting, developing and evaluating land management strategies that advance sustainable management in Africa, especially in relation to issues of agrodiversity, land conservation, forest management and water quality protection. UNU has organized a number of workshops in order to enhance the capacity development of research and scientific institutions in East Asia. The goal is to help these institutions to better understand and monitor the following problems: pollution coming to coastal areas from land-based sources and the status of different mountain and forest systems in relation to pressures from global change. A UNU study[10] shows that rigid command-and-control approaches to environmental compliance by industry lead to high costs and widespread undercompliance. Instead, developing countries can achieve large savings and improved compliance through such economic incentives as low-interest financing for environmentally friendly industries and supportive market mechanisms. UNU has begun execution of a project initiated by the Global Environment Facility on the sustainable management of natural resources in the High Pamir-Alai Mountains in Central Asia. A UNU study[11] alerted the world to the growing negative environmental impacts of computers. The materials and energy-intensive production process, greater adoption of personal computers worldwide, plus the rapid rate at which they are discarded for newer machines, add up to growing mountains of garbage and increasingly serious contributions to resource depletion, environmental pollution and climate change. Government incentives are needed worldwide to extend the life of personal computers and slow the growth of high-tech trash.

17. **Human rights**. Human rights violations are often particularly severe in societies undergoing major political, social and economic transformations. A UNU study[12] reaffirms the priority of human rights practices in transition societies not only because of their intrinsic value, but also because of their "multiplier" effects on democratization, economic development and conflict resolution. Another UNU study[13] concludes that justice and accountability are integral not impediments to attaining peace and stability.

18. **Partnerships**. Reinforcing and extending the philosophy of the Global Compact Initiative, a UNU study[14] urges businesses to assume responsibility for the

consequences of their operations on society, including the complex challenges of unintended side effects and complicity, by conducting impact assessments of possible human rights abuses, environmental damage, displacement of people and reduced soil fertility caused by pesticides, etc.

V. Coordination and interaction within the United Nations system

19. The University continues to give high priority to enhancing its interactions with the United Nations. Informal substantive consultations and information sharing between the Rector and the senior academic staff of UNU and United Nations senior officials now take place routinely. The same pattern characterizes interactions at the working level. Extensive interactions also take place between UNU and the Strategic Planning Unit in the Executive Office of the Secretary-General. The head of the Unit attends the sessions of the UNU Council on behalf of the Secretary-General and maintains ongoing working relations with the UNU office at United Nations Headquarters. Such close ties have been of great benefit to UNU, as they have facilitated the identification of areas of cooperation between the Secretariat and the University.

20. Coordinating and rationalizing research activities within the United Nations system can help to meet the important goals that have been identified in the outcomes of the major global conferences, including the United Nations Millennium Declaration. The Rector of UNU, in collaboration with the Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva, has been convening an annual research and policy dialogue at Geneva among the research institutions of the United Nations and its specialized agencies. In 2003, the fourth Geneva dialogue focused largely on refugees and human rights in societies in transition. In 2004, the fifth Geneva dialogue focused on new security threats and disarmament; good governance and reconciliation in post-conflict situations; and freshwater and coastal water management.

21. These multilevel and ongoing contacts are especially useful to the University in defining the general directions of its long-term programme of research and capacity development and in its biennial programme planning. They have enabled UNU to focus more effectively on matters of immediate concern to the United Nations and to enhance the policy contents and relevance of its studies while maintaining their academic excellence.

22. All in all, in 2003 and 2004, UNU collaborated with about 40 organizations in the United Nations system, from policy and operational to research and specialized agencies, in implementing its activities. Many officials of the United Nations and the Bretton Woods institutions participate in the research work of different parts of UNU as well as in conferences they organize. The types and extent of cooperation vary widely. UNU continues to explore ways and means to strengthen its connection to the United Nations system of organizations by enhancing existing links and forging new cooperative relationships.

23. Since all 2003, UNU has made a point of showcasing the work of its Research and Training Centres and Programmes at the United Nations Secretariat. Between November 2003 and November 2004, a total of 13 panel seminars were organized,

featuring UNU research on topics as varied as "The Globalization of Human Rights", "Regional Security — A Path to Better Global Governance?", "Wider Perspectives on Growth, Inequality and Poverty" and "WTO and the challenges for trade-led growth". These panels are a good complement of other public events, such as book launches, around the world as a way to disseminate the work of the UNU Research and Training Centres and Programmes, and to raise awareness on global issues.

Meetings of United Nations senior officials in the economic and social fields

24. Through the Rector, the United Nations University has input into the meetings of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB). These enable UNU to stay informed of the changing policy concerns of the Organization that require independent and new thinking and to identify research topics for inclusion in the UNU programme that could serve to maximize the University's contributions to the work of the United Nations system. For the future, a better participation in the High-Level Committee on Programmes of CEB is destined to improve the input of UNU on the agenda of CEB.

Executive Committee on Economic and Social Affairs

25. UNU has been fully involved in the activities of the Executive Committee on Economic and Social Affairs from the time of its inception. Besides regular participation in Committee's deliberations, including the elaboration of consolidated proposals to the Secretary-General and the preparation of reports to be submitted to the central intergovernmental organs, UNU has developed and submitted specific inputs for a number of Committee projects. The good cooperation existing between UNU-WIDER and the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat is a testimony of the fruitful involvement of UNU with the Executive Committee on Economic and Social Affairs.

Cooperation with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

26. The University has collaborated with the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in organizing annual conferences on "globalization with a human face". The 2004 conference focused on the preservation and promotion of intangible cultural heritage.

27. The project on sustainable land management in drylands is a unique collaboration between UNESCO, which pioneered arid land studies in 1956, the International Centre for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas (ICARDA), an organization that emphasizes dry land agriculture, and UNU, which conducted desertification research from 1976 to 1984. The project seeks to facilitate the transfer of experiences from one country or region to other similar environments. An international workshop held at Tashkent in August 2003 brought together a multidisciplinary group of experts and various institutional partners, including ICARDA and the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment programme. This meeting highlighted the urgency of needs in developing countries for capacity-building and cohesive strategies for integrated resource management in drylands.

VI. Conclusion

28. The United Nations University has made continuing progress in enhancing its interaction with other bodies in the United Nations system and strengthening its contributions to the work of the United Nations. The University is focusing its work on the core concerns of the United Nations and establishing proper mechanisms to enable it to stay attuned of evolving priorities of the United Nations.

Notes

[1] *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-ninth Session, Supplement No. 31* (A/59/31).

[2] Edward Newman and Roland Rich, eds., *The United Nations Role in Promoting Democracy: Between Ideals and Reality*, UNU Press, 2004.

[3] Amin Saikal and Albrecht Schnabel, eds., *Democratization in the Middle East: Experiences, Struggles, Challenges*, UNU Press, 2003.

[4] Tony Addison and Alan Roe, eds., *Fiscal Policy for Development: Poverty, Reconstruction and Growth*, Palgrave Macmillan, May 2004.

[5] Ravi Kanbur and Anthony J. Venables, eds., *Spatial Inequality and Development*, UNU-WIDER Studies in Development Economics, Oxford University Press, January 2005.

[6] Edward Newman and Joanne van Selm, eds., *Refugees and Forced Displacement: International Security, Human Vulnerability, and the State*, UNU Press, 2003.

[7] In particular: A. B. Atkinson, *New Sources of Development Finance: Funding the Millennium Development Goals*, UNU World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER), 2004.

[8] *Assessment of the Risk of Zinc Deficiency in Populations and Options for its Control*, in collaboration with the International Zinc Nutrition Consultative Group and the International Union of Nutrition Sciences, March 2004.

[9] *The Role of Registers and Databases in the Protection of Traditional Knowledge*, UNU Institute of Advanced Studies (UNU-IAS), January 2004.

[10] Zafar Adeel, ed., *East Asian Experience in Environmental Governance – Response in a Rapidly Developing Region*, UNU Press, 2003.

[11] Ruediger Kuehr and Eric Williams, eds., *Computers and the Environment: Understanding and Managing their Impacts*, Kluwer Academic Publishers and United Nations University, October 2003.

[12] Shale Horowitz and Albrecht Schnabel, eds., *Human Rights and Societies in Transition: Causes, Consequences, Responses*, UNU Press, April 2004.

[13] Ramesh Thakur and Peter Malcontent, eds., *From Sovereign Impunity to International Accountability: The Search for Justice in a World of States*, UNU Press, 2004.

[14] Lene Bomann-Larsen and Oddny Wiggen, eds., *Responsibility in World Business: Managing Harmful Side-effects of Corporate Activity*, UNU Press, 2004.